

# Genesis Unbound

by John Sailhamer  
Multnomah Books, 1996, 257 pp.

Reviewed by Andrew Kulikovsky

John Sailhamer (who only recently joined the faculty of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina), is among the first rank of Hebrew and Old Testament scholars. He has authored several books including the commentary on Genesis in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* series, as well as serving on the Living Bible Revision Committee dealing with the book of Genesis.

In *Genesis Unbound*, Sailhamer adopts a rather unique view of the creation account in order to harmonise it with the claims of modern science. Sailhamer raises a number of points on which young earth creationists would fully agree. For example, he correctly points out that the creation account is written as history (p. 28), and that, too often, modern views are allowed to determine what the biblical writers actually meant (p. 11). He also rightly points out that although science and history may provide helpful insights, the focus of interpretation must be the text itself (p. 20). Indeed, he is spot on when he states that we must know what the Biblical view of creation is before we can attempt to correlate it with modern science (p. 27).

However, despite admitting that Genesis 1 appears to indicate that God made the whole world and everything in it, as well as the sun, moon and stars in six days (p. 89), Sailhamer claims that Genesis 1:1 refers to the creation of the entire functioning universe, including the sun, moon and stars in the heavens, and the plants and animals on earth (p. 14). He goes on to argue that Genesis 1:2 onwards describes God preparing a land for man and woman to inhabit – the same land promised to Abraham and his descendants and the same land given to the Israelites after their wandering in the desert (p. 14).

Sailhamer essentially holds to a kind of modified gap theory. He argues that “beginning” (Heb. *reshit*) can refer to an indefinite and possibly long period of time. He cites Genesis 10:10, and Jeremiah 28:1 for support. However, the instance in Genesis 10:10 carries no temporal reference at all and thus provides no support at all for Sailhamer’s claim.

According to Sailhamer, *bereshit* tells us that God created the universe over a period of time, rather than a single instant. But this is a very dubious conclusion indeed. Qal perfect verbs which refer to actions (such as *bara*, “created”) rather than states of being, indicate an *event*<sup>1</sup> not a process. Furthermore, Sailhamer argues that the Hebrew words *rishonah* or *techillah* would be more appropriate for communicating a single event, resulting in a translation like “The first thing God did was to create the universe” (pp. 40-41). However, both these words do not necessarily refer to an event and more often

---

<sup>1</sup> B. K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, Indiana, 1990, p. 480.

than not refer to a period of time. In addition, the resulting statement would not rule out the existence and activities of anyone or anything else, and therefore, the notion of a unique self-existent God bringing everything into being through creation *ex nihilo* (John 1:3) would be lost.

While it is certainly true that *bereshit* is occasionally used the way Sailhamer describes (e.g. Jeremiah 28:1), it is important to note that *all* the cases outside Genesis 1 are also modified by a prepositional phrase i.e. “In the beginning *of the reign of Zedekiah.*” Genesis 1:1, on the other hand, contains no such modifier – indeed, *bereshit* is in the absolute state in the Hebrew and is therefore grammatically independent of the verbal clause (“God created...”). In fact, even if *bereshit* was understood as Sailhamer suggests, there is no basis for claiming that it could refer to a *long* period of time. Rather, it would merely represent an unspecified period of time. Zedekiah reigned for 11 years so “in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah” most likely refers to the first few years of his reign. It should be clear that “the beginning” refers to a much smaller amount of time compared with the total time in which the king reigned. Therefore, in regard to the six days of creation, even with Sailhamer’s own reasoning, “the beginning” could at most only refer to the first few days – certainly not to a long period of time.

Despite his plea to allow the text of Genesis to speak for itself, Sailhamer fails to take his own advice. He writes: “Given what appears to be true about the age of the earth, it is likely that millions or billions of years transpired during this time of ‘the beginning’” (p. 105). Such a comment clearly indicates that Sailhamer has allowed the claims of modern science to determine what the text is saying. Note also that he places the formation of the fossil record in the supposed period of time indicated by “the beginning” (p. 33).

Sailhamer also claims that *hashshamayim we’et ha’arets* is a merism<sup>2</sup> meaning “universe” – indeed, a fully formed universe (pp. 56-57). However, it is highly unlikely, given the context, that this is a merism. Firstly, Genesis 1:1 does not stand alone, but is grammatically connected to Genesis 1:2, which contains three circumstantial clauses, the first of which describes the initial state of the “earth” mentioned in verse 1. Therefore, since the “earth” of verse 1 is further described in verse 2 as a separate entity, it cannot be part of a merism. Furthermore, Genesis 1:14-18 makes it quite clear that the universe was not fully formed.

As I briefly mentioned above, Sailhamer argues that the *erets* (“earth”, “land”) of verse 2 is a reference to the Promised Land (p. 48-49). Indeed, he claims that a reader familiar with the theme and purpose of the Pentateuch would naturally understand the land of Genesis 1 as referring to the Promised Land (p. 52). This is a very spurious claim indeed, considering that none of the Talmudic writers understood Genesis 1 in this way – and they could hardly be accused of being ignorant of the theme and purpose of the Pentateuch!

Sailhamer objects to rendering the Hebrew phrase *tohu wabohu* as “formless and empty,” stating that this phrase, when properly understood, refers to a desolate and

---

<sup>2</sup> A merism (or merismus) is a rhetorical device used to describe the whole by enumerating its parts (usually those parts which define the boundaries of the whole).

uninhabitable wasteland (pp. 63-64). This desolate and uninhabitable wasteland is said to be the initial state of the garden.

While it is true that *tohu wabohu* should be understood as referring to a desolate and uninhabitable place, it doesn't preclude the idea of that place being formless and empty, since a formless and empty place would also be a desolate and uninhabitable wasteland. In addition, Genesis 1:2 and 1:9 make it clear that there was no dry ground at all until day three!

Since Sailhamer believes the entire functioning universe, including the sun, was created "in the beginning," he claims that God's pronouncement "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3) does not refer to the creation of light, but to the advent of sunrise, and cites Exodus 10:23, Nehemiah 8:3 and Genesis 44:3 as support (pp. 112-113). While Nehemiah 8:3 is a valid example, Exodus 10:23 does not refer at all to the sunrise, and Genesis 44:3 uses a verbal form, unlike Gen 1:3. In any case, since the evening and morning which terminate each day are repeatedly mentioned, why isn't the sunrise mentioned in this way on every day? Indeed, if the sun had been continuously rising on every other day for billions of years prior to the first day of the creation week, then what is so significant about this particular sunrise that it deserves a mention at all?

The idea that "the heavens and the earth" refers to the entire functioning universe also forces Sailhamer to adopt a very unique (not to mention, very dubious) rendering of Genesis 1:14. He claims that *yehi...lehabedil* ("let there be...to separate") indicates that the lights already existed (i.e. created on day one) and that God merely appointed them "to separate" on day four. But in the Hebrew the infinitive *lehabedil* is far removed from the verb *yehi*, of which "lights" is the object. Therefore the rendering "Let there be lights ... for the purpose of separating..." makes much better sense, syntactically. This retains the expression of purpose but does not assume the pre-existence of the lights. The latter rendering is also the traditional one, and is supported by all the major translations<sup>3</sup> as well as the LXX.<sup>4</sup> Also, if verse 14 expresses what Sailhamer claims, then verse 15 would be redundant. Thus the text appears to indicate the pre-existence of light, not the pre-existence of the sun and moon. In any case, if the sun, moon and stars were only commanded to mark days, years and seasons on the fourth day (p. 135), then what were they doing during the supposed billions of years before this point?

Sailhamer's interpretation involves many other fanciful ideas, such as a belief that the sky was still empty of life on day two (p. 122). But this is ridiculous if birds and other flying creatures had been flying around for millions of years as he claimed previously.

In regard to the creation of the seas on day three, Sailhamer makes a point of noting that the text clearly says "one place" not "many places," and interprets this to mean that the seas were formed in and alongside of the Promised Land. In other words, the waters which were gathered into one place on day three are actually the lakes and seas which cover the Promised Land today, namely, the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea (p. 126). But this is surely a tortuous reading of the text. These three seas are not in one place at all. Indeed, the Promised Land adjoins only a very small part of the Mediterranean Sea, which extends far beyond the middle east, let alone the land

---

<sup>3</sup> NIV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, KJV, ASV.

<sup>4</sup> The LXX reads: *genathatosan phostares en to stereomati tou ouranou eis phausin tas gas...* "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens, for the purpose of illuminating the earth..."

of Israel. Furthermore, Sailhamer considers the creation of sea creatures on day five to be a populating of these “local” seas, rather than the initial global creation of sea creatures (p. 139). But such a belief is surely absurd: how could the Mediterranean Sea not be filled with life after millions of years while the adjoining seas were? In addition, Sailhamer seems to assume that what God created in Genesis 1 is more or less what we see today. He doesn’t even consider the significant role that tectonic plate movements and the global flood would have had in dramatically reshaping the surface of the earth.

In a surprising statement on page 126, Sailhamer also claims that “no forms of vegetation are mentioned in Genesis 1:9-11 other than fruit trees.” This is completely untrue. On the contrary, the Hebrew text clearly states that God produced general vegetation (*deshe*) and seed-bearing plants (*eseb mazria zera*) as well as fruit trees (*ets peri oseh peri*).

Regarding Genesis 2, Sailhamer posits that the writer is taking a closer look at the creation of mankind and their placement in the garden which had the same boundaries as the Promised Land.

He states that, in Genesis 2, the animals were created after man, making Genesis 1 and 2 contradictory. He then argues that this contradiction is not a problem, but rather, helps us to understand the larger meaning and unity between Genesis 1 and 2 (p. 89). He goes on to say that the idea of two distinct and contradictory accounts is simply the viewpoint of modern readers (p. 90). However, this is surely a case of burying one’s head in the sand. If Genesis 1 and 2 say different things regarding the order of creation, then how can these accounts be regarded as complimentary rather than contradictory? How does the apparent contradiction in the order of creation help us to understand the larger meaning and unity between the two chapters?

According to Sailhamer, the rendering “...now the Lord God had formed...” for Genesis 2:19, is faulty because “the Hebrew text doesn’t contain the proper verb form for such a translation.” (p. 89). This is a very surprising statement from Hebrew scholar. Firstly, Sailhamer seems to be confused over the aspectual identification of the clause “had formed” – this is actually indicative of a pluperfect not a perfect. Secondly, the standard grammars<sup>5</sup> stand against Sailhamer on this, as do modern translations such as the NIV

On page 150, He talks about the gold and precious stones in the garden which he equates to the Promised Land, Israel. Yet where is all the gold and jewels in the Palestinian region? Why haven’t they been exploited?

One of the biggest Biblical problems which Sailhamer must overcome is the statement in Exodus 20:11: “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.” In response, Sailhamer claims that this verse doesn’t use the merism “heavens and earth” to describe the work of the sixth day because that phrase is followed by a list (p. 106). I agree, but, as I argued above, I don’t think Genesis 1:1 contains a merism either, so Sailhamer’s distinction fails. In any case, Exodus 31:17 contains a similar phrase which is not followed by a list, so his distinction will not work there either. Sailhamer goes on to argue that Exodus

---

<sup>5</sup> B. K. Waltke & M. O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, Indiana, 1990. E. Kautzch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, translated by A. E. Cowley, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1910.

20:11 refers to Genesis 1:2-2:4 rather than Genesis 1:1 (p. 107). But merism or no merism, Exodus 20:11 contains *exactly the same* phrase in the Hebrew as Genesis 1:1, which suggests a definite link between the 2 verses.

Furthermore, Sailhamer also claims that the use of *asah* (do, make, form) in Exodus 20:11 instead of *bara* (create), indicates that this verse doesn't refer to the creation of the universe (p. 107). However, there are several verses (e.g. Exodus 31:17; 2 Kings 19:15; 2 Chronicles 2:12; Isaiah 37:16) which use *asah*, yet clearly refer to the creation of the universe. Therefore, *bara* and *asah* can be used interchangeably.

In addition, Sailhamer's interpretation suffers from the same theological problems as all other old earth interpretations. Sailhamer clearly accepts an age of the earth in the order of billions of years (p. 193), and therefore the usual problem of death before the Fall arises. Indeed, he acknowledges the possibility of death (of dinosaurs) before the Fall and seems quite comfortable with it (p. 29).

The book also contains a few factual errors. For example, Sailhamer seems to be thinking of the *Institute for Creation Research*, when he states that the *Creation Research Society* is based in San Diego, California (p. 173). He also completely misunderstands the implications of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) in his discussion of this evidence on page 145. The way he presents it, it is as if the evolutionary biologists concede that the studies point back to us all arising from a common pair. But in fact it works like this: The "one woman" concept comes from mtDNA, which is inherited only from the mother. The mtDNA of all humans on earth today shows indications that it is all inherited from the one woman. But note that this does *not* mean that they believe there were no other women on earth at that time, nor that these other women did not contribute any nuclear DNA to today's populations. This concept is analogous to surnames, which are inherited through the father. If sixteen families are put on an island, with no intermarriage from outside, then surnames can become "extinct" every time there is a line with no male offspring. In fact, it is likely that rather quickly, all surnames will narrow down to one or two at most, in a small population to begin with, with no intermarriage from outsiders. Indeed, the descendants of the Bounty mutineers on Pitcairn island came to all share the same surname. In that sense, they all had descended from the same man, but of course they also descended from lots of other men alive at the same time as that man.

Now it is possible to regard that mtDNA evidence as consistent with the Bible, but not if one simultaneously accepts the "molecular clock" assumptions, which Sailhamer does, whether he realises it or not, by referring to the genetic evidence as showing an age of "200,000-270,000 years." Furthermore, the same thing done on the Y chromosome (only inherited from the father) shows that it can all be traced back to one man. But using the "clock" assumptions, which Sailhamer accepts as stated, the Y chromosome "Adam" lived at a different time to the mitochondrial Eve, and therefore they would have never met.

Sailhamer claims that his "historic creationism" differs from scientific creationism in 3 ways: (1) Scientific creationism posits that modern science holds the answer to the meaning of the text, while historic creationism allows the text to speak for itself (p. 44). However, this is a total misrepresentation of scientific creationism, which aims to present purely scientific evidence for a recent creation. It does not attempt to interact

directly with the text at all. Sailhamer should be comparing his Historic Creationism to Biblical Creationism – in which case, he would find that it also demands that the text should be allowed to speak for itself. In actual fact, Sailhamer’s criticisms are far more applicable to those who hold to Progressive Creationism and Theistic Evolution, such as Hugh Ross, Don Stoner and Alan Hayward. (2) He claims that his view can be traced back to a view which “flourished” before the rise of modern science and its use in Biblical interpretation (p. 45). This is simply not true! It is the normal view of Genesis 1 – the creation and forming of the entire earth and universe – which has dominated the history of interpretation. (3) He affirms that Genesis 1-2 is history not mythology or poetry. But such a view is also held by Biblical/Scientific creationists! With such mischaracterisations of scientific creationism it is abundantly clear that Sailhamer either hasn’t done his homework or simply doesn’t understand it.

One of Sailhamer’s more absurd claims is that his interpretation is “both faithful to the biblical text and connected to a long line of scholarly interpretations that span the centuries.” He also claims that before the rise of modern science, such views “dominated the field.” (p. 156). Again this is simply not true. Not only does Sailhamer fail to cite these earlier works which “dominated the field,” but a detailed and scholarly history of interpretation of the days of creation produced by J. P. Lewis<sup>6</sup> shows conclusively that it is the Biblical Creationist interpretation which is “connected to a long line of scholarly interpretations that span the centuries” and which has “dominated the field.” Indeed, it seems rather dishonest for Sailhamer to label his view as “Historic” when nothing could be further from the truth.

While there are some things in this book we can agree with, there are many more things, such as those outlined above, where we must disagree. The basic thesis is fatally flawed, and it appears that the only things which Sailhamer has “unbound” are the rules of grammar, the semantic field of words, and the laws of logic.

---

<sup>6</sup> J. P. Lewis, “The Days of Creation: An Historical Survey of Interpretation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (December 1989):433-455.